

LETTER

RABBIT WELFARE AND LEGISLATION IN THE UK

Dear Sir,

It has recently been noted that there are an estimated 1-1.7 million rabbits within the UK (PDSA, 2011; PFMA, 2012). Currently there have only been several small scale studies in the UK which have looked at the management, personality and behaviour of pet rabbits and the views, personality and attitudes of new and current rabbit owners (see Mullan and Main, 2006; Edgar and Mullan, 2011).

Interestingly, recently Edgar and Mullan (2011) found that new UK rabbit owners stated that 40% of 26 respondents, who answered the question, intended to house their rabbits in enclosures larger than that recommended by welfare charities (e.g. PDSA, RWAF). However, 60% stated that they would house the rabbit in an enclosure which was either the same or smaller than the recommend minimum size of 0.68 m³. Having said this, it is unclear why 50% of the overall 52 respondents did not answer the question regarding housing size. Furthermore, 60% of respondents in the same study did not answer a question on how long a rabbit would spend in a hutch. This may suggest that little prior consideration was given or education sought before buying a rabbit. Further research is needed to note what impact animal charities and the government has on rabbit owners and what methods are best to educate owners about important welfare issues.

Recent research found that smaller enclosures may affect rabbit welfare as they prevent behavioural opportunities (Dixon *et al.*, 2010). However, the current UK legislation does not require that rabbits are kept in a minimum size enclosure and limited reference is made to housing of individual rabbits. Current UK legislation only applies to pet rabbits is general such as the five freedoms under the Animal Welfare act 2006. This legislation is non-specific in comparison to other EU countries which state a minimum size enclosure is needed and individual rabbits are not allowed to be kept on their own. This is in contrast to the UK as Edgar and Mullan (2011) stated that 41% intended to keep their rabbit on its own.

Overall, a fully comparative review of EU countries legislation is needed regarding rabbits and comparison to the UK. From a welfare perspective more large scale research is needed to take into account pet rabbits environment, management and the education and responsibility of pet shops and owners. Such requirements need to be reflected in government legislation and through education. Furthermore, a literature review and further research is needed into the welfare and behaviour (e.g. stress levels) in rabbits which are housed and managed in different ways within the UK (similar to other countries e.g. Schempers *et al.*, 2009).

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